

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Lunenburg County Courthouse

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: Lunenburg County Court Square, intersection of
State Rte. 40, State Rte. 49, and County Rte. 675

Not for publication:

City/Town: Lunenburg

Vicinity:

State: VA

County: Lunenburg Code: 111

Zip Code: 23952

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: ☐

Public-Local: ☐

Public-State: ☒

Public-Federal: ☐

Category of Property

Building(s): ☒

District: ☐

Site: ☐

Structure: ☐

Object: ☐

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

3

—

—

1

4

Noncontributing

— buildings

— sites

— structures

— objects

— Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 5

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:

Jeffersonian Courthouse NHL Thematic Nomination Project

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Government: Courthouse

Sub:

Current: Government: Courthouse

Sub:

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: Early Republic: Early Classical Revival

Materials: Brick, wood, stone

Foundation: Brick

Walls: Brick

Roof: Slate

Other:

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Summary

The present nomination deals with only with the Lunenburg County Courthouse Square, not with the larger Lunenburg Court House Historic District. On the outside, William A. Howard and Dabney Cosby's courthouse of 1824-27 retains much of its intended character as a red-and-white Jeffersonian Palladian temple of masonry construction with a fine display of the Doric Order. The most important change is the double staircase added in 1858 when the courtroom was raised to the second story. On the inside, the lifting of the courtroom and later alterations have taken their toll, but a substantial amount of original construction survives, a good deal of it formerly unrecognized.

Exterior

Built of two stories of red brick with white-painted trim, the Lunenburg County Courthouse is externally an American counterpart to a Greco-Roman temple. Specifically the courthouse is a counterpart to a tetrastyle prostyle temple, that is, a temple with a portico of four columns at the entry end only. Facing south, the Lunenburg portico platform, rising four steps or some 28 inches above the current ground level, is made of a local rough granite or gneiss. The Doric columns of the portico consist of worn freestone bases, masonry shafts (no doubt of brick) obscured by a coat of twentieth-century cement, and well dressed freestone capitals. The Order is taken with slight adaptations from Jefferson's favorite Doric, the Doric of Andrea Palladio as published in Giacomo Leoni's three English editions of Palladio's Four Books (London, 1715 ff.). The column shafts measure some 8-1/3 diameters in height -- nearly or exactly -- and thus they fall well within Palladio's range for the Doric (7-1/2 to 8-2/3 diameters). The shafts even taper on a supple curve called entasis, although it is difficult to say whether the curvature starts a third of the way up, as Palladio advised. The columns carry a wooden entablature that wraps around the building. Above rises a wooden pediment with a lunette window, that Jeffersonian preference derived from Roman baths via anything but a purist's chain of transmission, and a gabled slate roof. The Lunenburg Order does not reach Jefferson's ideal; thus, the Doric plaques called triglyphs fall off their proper axis four times. In a naïve fashion that recalls the porticoes of Jefferson's second Monticello, the portico ceiling sits directly on top of the capitals rather than resting higher up upon some internal part of the entablature. The brickwork of the entry front is Flemish bond, painted a much-worn coat of red with

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white mortar joints. This regularly articulated three-bay main front has a two-leaf nineteenth-century door with four panels per leaf, three panels of each leaf having been glazed in 1939. The main front also has six-over-six windows and chiseled freestone sills. An old wooden bench stands east of the central door, while a wooden bulletin board accessible to all hangs to the west of this main entry. A double flight of coarsely detailed wooden stairs cuts across the lower-story windows. These staircases were added in 1857-58 when a builder named Robert Crymes raised the courtroom to the second floor in order to insert a Clerk's office on the first floor. The stairs were probably renewed in 1939. These staircases lead to the second-story door which is reduced in size from that on the first floor and is flanked by six-over six windows, likewise reduced from the windows of the first floor. A bell of unknown date, housed invisibly inside the pediment, is rung by pulling a cord that hangs from the portico ceiling. The Flemish bond flanks to the north and south originally stretched rearward in four regularly spaced bays but were extended to six bays with carefully matched detailing by the Richmond architect Marcellus E. Wright, Sr., in 1939. Each of these lateral walls had a door in the second bay from the front, now reworked into a window on both sides. The lateral windows of the original part of the building and their freestone sills match those of the south front. Originally the rear wall swelled outward in a segmentally curved apse capped by a full entablature, but the second story of this feature disappeared in the 1939 enlargement, although the lower walls are extant inside the extension. The north façade of the 1939 extension contains the only surviving chimney. At the north corner of the west flank, a twentieth-century steel staircase gives access to the courtroom level. An addition (1973-74; enlarged 1990s) stretches to the northwest with no attempt at sympathy at all.

Interior

The interior of the Lunenburg County Courthouse has been profoundly altered at various periods, above all by the raising of the courtroom to the second story in 1857-58. Originally the spaces were a variation on the Jeffersonian plan of the Charlotte County Courthouse, with an entry area and a courtroom. Today, as in 1827, one enters the first floor via a brick-walled vestibule with an office on either side, three rooms that form the major difference from Jefferson's model plan. The vestibule has two doorways and an arch framed in early nineteenth-century woodwork. The arch resembles an arch inside Pavilion III at the University of Virginia as well as the lunette of the Lunenburg portico. Originally this arch must have opened to the courtroom, very likely by way of a colonnade supporting the jury room gallery, but today this arch gives onto a passage leading to the Clerk's main office. The Clerk's office area is a miscellany of spaces, with the terrazzo flooring that appears throughout the main level. The original courtroom apse wall remains partially visible at the north end of the Clerk's space as well as in the cellar, where the curved walling was extended downward when the cellar was added. B. F. Smith of Washington, D.C., inserted a fireproof record room in 1910, as a marble tablet on the apse wall records. There was no cellar before Smith's work, only a crawl space.

The second story originally was reached by staircases that led up the east and west sides of the courtroom to some form of gallery, which probably rested on columns. The gallery ran in front of the two jury rooms at the south end of the building, a larger western and a smaller eastern jury room. These two rooms were warmed by fireplaces and a southern exposure. To hold meetings of the local Masonic lodge, the two chambers were designed to be thrown into one by means of a broad paneled "swinging" door, which, rather than swinging, slid up on pulleys into the partition between the two rooms. The door remains largely intact in the passage that was inserted to reach the upstairs front door atop the exterior staircases. To save the expense of a stove for the courtroom, the commissioners also intended the throwing the jury rooms into one to accommodate winter sessions of the court and religious services. Work on the walls of the east jury room in 2003 revealed the presence of late nineteenth-century graffiti, some of it of Civil War vintage.

In the original courtroom the Bar and the Bench occupied the full height of the north end of the building. The apse, lost in the remodeling of 1939, focused attention on the chief magistrate's seat in front of a pier between two windows. The present courtroom, last renovated in the early 1990s by Architectural Partners of Lynchburg, is a simple, dignified oblong space. The only historic architectural elements are

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the doors and windows, which largely preserve the first-period architrave profiles but which date from at least three different times. The rest of the fittings belong to various decades of the twentieth century, notably a group of seating furniture (two early twentieth-century armchairs at the bar and twelve fixed jury chairs, swiveling and tilting) labeled by the B. L. Marble Chair Company of Bedford, Ohio. Another chair, from a set of at least four in the building, is identifiable as a product of the Virginia State Penitentiary. The 1939 undertaking appended judge's chambers and other rooms to the north.

Of the customary complex of courthouse buildings, Lunenburg retains a granite and marble Confederate Soldiers' Monument to the east, and two nineteenth-century wooden cottages of different vintages that served as offices on the northwest.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: Locally:

Applicable National

Register Criteria: A B C X D

Criteria Considerations

(Exceptions): A B C D E F G

NHL Criteria: Criterion 4 – FILL IN

NHL Theme(s): Shaping the Political Landscape

Areas of Significance: Political

Period(s) of Significance: 1827-1954

Significant Dates: 1824-27

Significant Person(s): Thomas Jefferson

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: William A. Howard and Dabney Cosby

Historic Contexts:

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

Summary

The Jeffersonian Palladian reform of Virginia civic architecture had one of its exceptional successes at the Lunenburg County Courthouse (1824-27), the direct descendant of Jefferson's Buckingham County Courthouse via Jefferson's Charlotte County Courthouse. At Lunenburg William A. Howard and Dabney Cosby -- aiming to outdo their models -- created a Jeffersonian/Virginian judicial hall with an apse and a gallery inside a building that looks like a temple on the outside. Embodying Jefferson's principle of enduring construction, the courthouse replaced a wooden one, and Cosby, retrained in the craft of bricklaying by Jefferson himself, executed finely built walls. Exemplifying Jefferson's principle of the display of the Orders, the builders devised a rich exhibition of the Doric Order of Palladio, the Doric that Jefferson admired the most. Jefferson's reform campaign is evident down to its imperfections, such as the failure to integrate the courthouse bell into the design.

Statement of Significance

Not even the Charlotte County Courthouse shows more graphically how Jefferson's reform of the Virginia courthouse worked than Lunenburg's temple of justice. The building illustrates Jefferson's techniques -- setting models that patrons would accept and training craftsmen. It likewise illustrates Jefferson's goals -- permanent construction and the display of the Orders on a building that inside adheres to a established local plan and outside follows the lines of ancient architecture at its greatest. At the same time, Lunenburg sprang from the desire of Jefferson's disciples William A. Howard and Dabney Cosby to exceed their prototypes.

The essential line of transmission of the models for the patrons is largely clear. The Lunenburg Court specified in 1823 that the new courthouse was "to be built after the plan of the new courthouse in charlotte [sic] County."¹ The Charlotte County Courthouse in turn was designed both on the example of Jefferson's Buckingham County Courthouse and, it would appear, on the example of a version of the generic Jefferson plan, K214-215, that underlies the Buckingham structure. In one significant detail, Lunenburg's 28" portico podium clearly belongs to the line of descent from K214-215, with its low 3-foot platform, rather than to the line of descent of the "temples" at ground level on the Lawn at the University of Virginia.

The line of transmission for the training of the workmen is also visible, if less clearly. According to Dabney Cosby's obituary, at the University of Virginia Jefferson trained Cosby in "architecture and the art of making brick," and externally the Lunenburg Courthouse pays full tribute to Jefferson's teaching models, the Pavilions at the University.² Delos D. Hughes cautiously proposes that Dabney Cosby was the "undertaker" or contractor for the Buckingham courthouse, with William A. Howard as one of the subcontractors for the carpentry. Cosby must have conveyed Jeffersonian Palladian lessons to Howard, who is not a known University contractor.

Replacing a wooden building, the excellent brickwork at Lunenburg runs true to Jefferson's campaign for enduring construction. The stone and brick of the columns belong to the same initiative; the original surface of the brick shafts was no doubt stuccoed, the handling that Jefferson had adopted on Palladio's authority.

At Lunenburg Howard, Cosby, and their patrons took a major step beyond the humble Tuscan Order to the nobler, richer Doric. The exterior Order comes with slight adaptations from Jefferson's favorite Doric, that of Palladio as published by Leoni. This is the Order that Jefferson adopted for the exterior of Monticello, the Order that he specified for the Hall of Representatives at the Virginia State Capitol, very likely the Order that he wanted for the Hall of Representatives at the United States Capitol, and the first Order that he erected when he began constructing his models along the Lawn of the University of Virginia, at Pavilion VII, now the Colonnade Club. Despite blemishes at Lunenburg, the splendor of a highly detailed Order shines forth in a fashion that should have gratified the Sage of Monticello.

Up to a point, Howard, Cosby, and their patrons adhered to the established Virginia floorplan that Jefferson had endorsed, with oblong judicial chamber, apse, and jury-room gallery on columns. But, in this realm as in that of the Orders, they

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took a step beyond the Jeffersonian prototypes. They made much of the space under the gallery into a vestibule and a pair of offices with solid brick partitions.

If Howard, Cosby, and their Lunenburg clients strove to outdo their sources, the architecture of the Courthouse remains firmly within the Jeffersonian persuasion, as its limitations confess. Thus, Jefferson could give no model for integrating a civic bell into a Classical design, and builders had to improvise. Whatever the date of the Lunenburg bell, the courthouse afforded it no better housing than an invisible location above the portico ceiling. Nonetheless, such a flaw is the last thing that one notices in the presence of a building that, from the Jeffersonian point of view, transported the enlightenment of ancient civilization to the fields of Southside Virginia.

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☒ Previously Listed in the National Register: VDHR#127-0042 (listed 4/17/1970)
- ☐ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- ☐ Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- ☒ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: VA-113 / HABS, VA,44-RICH,2-
- ☐ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record:

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☒ Other State Agency: The Library of Virginia
- ☐ Federal Agency
- ☐ Local Government
- ☐ University
- ☒ Other (Specify Repository): The Virginia Historical Society

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 9 acres

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
Lunenburg	17	743404E	4094102N

Verbal Boundary Description:

The boundary description for the Courthouse Square is
Lunenburg Tax Parcel Map Reference Number #32-A-64.

Boundary Justification: IRRELEVANT BECAUSE ONLY 9 ACRES?

These boundaries include the land historically associated with .

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

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NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS SURVEY
February 3, 2004

Endnotes

1. Quotation from County of Lunenburg, Order Book 24, p. 408 (10 November 1823).
2. Quotation from The North Carolina Standard (Raleigh), 12 July 1862.